Scenario planning: strategic interviews and conversations

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Abstract *The future cannot be measured. foresight is largely a matter of conjecture, and at the heart of conjecture lies conversation. Organizations are essentially networks of personal interconnections based on conversation. Thus, in enabling complex adaptive organizations to look ahead, conversation, in one form or another, becomes a key component of strategic planning. This article describes the range of interview methods from structured to more active and creative methods and the emergence of "the strategic conversation". The use of this technique is illustrated by examples.*

This paper has emerged from a major piece of research work on built environment futures, which examines the role of futures studies in built environment policy formulation with a particular exploration of the use of the foresight principle through scenario-planning techniques in the framing, testing and implementation of those policies.

To this end, over the past three years or so, the author has been engaged in conducting a dozen scenario planning studies as follows:

(1) Study 1: strategic construction industry planning.
(2) Study 2: scenario learning in the architectural heritage industry.
(3) Study 3: built environment faculty futures.
(4) Study 4: DIT – scenario foresight exercise.
(5) Study 5: global real estate futures.
(6) Study 6: the "wind tunnel" – future directions in real estate research and development.
(7) Study 7: imagineering sustainable cities.
(8) Study 8: sustaining the tourism industry.
(9) Study 9: Dublin City Foresight.
(10) Study 10: alternative futures for Irish property.
(11) Study 11: Pacific Rim: future scenarios.
(12) Study 12: scenarios to examine construction innovation.

In addressing the subject of strategic interviews and conversation, the article presents a particular approach towards in-depth interviewing that evolved throughout the various individual exercises, projects and experiments (studies) that took place as part of the overall venture.

The paper first sets the historical context within which qualitative interviewing emerged, and describes the various methods that are employed. The value of "creative" in-depth interviews in the form of "strategic conversations" is recognised as a critical component of the foresight and scenario process. The article records the way in which the art of the strategic conversation was adopted and adapted for the purposes of the studies, together with an appraisal of the process pursued, the participants involved, the necessary preparation, the procedures followed, and the practicalities faced. In the same way, the different kinds of interrogative group exercise are reviewed in relation to the respective stages of the scenario-planning process at which they were used. The paper closes by affirming that futures studies and foresight are largely a matter of conjecture, but at the heart of conjecture lies conversation, and thus strategic

conversations, individual and group, are fast emerging as a central feature of the scenario-planning process.

Strategic interviews and conversations

Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand society at large and one another individually. The practice of interviewing embraces a wide variety of forms and performs a multiplicity of uses. Indeed, reliance on interviewing to acquire information has become so pervasive that it has been said that we live in an "interview society" (Silverman, 1997). Increasingly, moreover, qualitative researchers are recognising that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering, but active interactions between two, or more, people, leading to negotiated, contextually-based results, examining the "how" and "why" as well as the "what". They are often more like conversations. And, in this way, the interview really has become a means of contemporary story-telling (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). Society has almost come to rely on interviews and, to a large extent, take them for granted. Interviewing itself has become institutionalised, with a set of rules and roles, which are widely known and broadly shared. It is now part of a mass culture, whereby oral examination in various forms has emerged as the most practicable mechanism for obtaining information about individuals, groups and organisations.

The context

In recent times, the tradition of interviewing has evolved from two trends. First, interviewing found great popularity and widespread use in classical diagnosis and counselling, where the concern was with the quality of responses. Second, it came to be widely employed in psychological testing, where the emphasis was more on measurement (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Opinion polling was another early form of interviewing, taking hold in the USA in the 1930s, and having proliferated ever since. The study of attitudes in social psychology, led by the Chicago School, also emerged during the 1920s and 1930s in the USA. The Second World War witnessed a massive increase in survey research using interview techniques, and more than half a million US military personnel were interviewed in one manner or another, resulting in Samuel Stouffer's landmark work *The American Soldier* (cited in Young, 1966).

Further impetus to social ethnography through interviewing was given during the 1950s and 1960s by various studies of "managers managing" (Gill and Johnson, 1997), but the three decades from the 1970s through to the 1990s saw quantitative survey research dominate sociology and other related fields of inquiry. Qualitative interviewing, of course, continued to be practised, but it too assumed some of the quantifiable scientific rigour that so preoccupied survey research. The 1990s, however, have witnessed a growing separation of quantitative ethnographic observation and qualitative ethnographic interviewing, and an emerging recognition of the value of each in their different contexts.

More recently, what are described as "postmodernist ethnographers" have concerned themselves with some of the assumptions present in the process of interviewing and with the controlling role of the interviewer in it. These concerns have led to new directions in qualitative interviewing, focusing on the increased attention being paid to such matters as the voices of respondents, the use of words, the interviewer-respondent relationship, and other elements such as gender, race, social status and age (Fontana and Frey, 2000). In the context of this study, however, the aim has been for the researcher, as methodological "*bricoleur*", to have some grasp of the various methods for collecting and analysing empirical materials, and an awareness of the respective strengths, weaknesses and suitability of various approaches in different situations.

Methods

Structured interviewing

Familiarly, the structured interview is where the interviewer asks all the respondents the same series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories. There is generally little room for variation in responses, except where open-ended questions (which are rare) may be used. Moreover, there is seldom much flexibility in the way questions are asked and answered in the structured interview setting; a standard set of guidelines normally is employed; the interviewer plays a neutral role; little room is allowed for improvisation; and basically nothing is left to chance. This kind of interview often elicits rational responses. But it overlooks, or inadequately assesses, the emotional dimension (Converse and Schuman, 1974). Given the highly behavioural and subjective nature of scenario planning, scant recourse is had to the fully structured interview.

Unstructured interviewing

Palpably, the unstructured interview can provide a greater breadth of data than other forms of interviewing, given the inherently qualitative nature of the exercise. A prime distinction between the full, structured interview and the unstructured interview is that the former aims at capturing precise data of a codable nature in order to explain conduct and performance within pre-established categories, whereas the latter attempts to understand the complex behaviour of people and the likely outcome of events without imposing any a priori categorisation that may limit the field of inquiry. At its simplest, the unstructured interview is where the interviewer has a general area of interest and concern, but lets a conversation develop within this area.

In adopting the unstructured interview approach there are a number of issues that have to be addressed, such as: accessing the setting; understanding the language and culture of the respondents; deciding upon how to present

oneself; locating an informant; gaining trust; establishing a rapport; and collecting associated empirical materials (Fontana and Frey, 2000). In reality, it can be argued that few, if any, interviews are entirely unstructured, and so it is with scenario planning, that seemingly open-ended interviews, in fact, rest upon a predetermined, yet highly flexible agenda.

Semi-structured interviewing

Popularly, the semi-structured interview provides a halfway-house between the highly rigorous and inflexible fully structured interview and the open-ended and more subjective unstructured interview. There is a basic framework, a set of standard questions, and a given procedure, but great latitude is given to the interviewer in how different respondents are treated. Probes and prompts are commonplace, and the interviewer is free to modify the format and order of questions as appropriate. In practice, semi-structured interviewing takes a wide variety of forms and fulfils a diverse range of functions. It plays a prominent part in the scenario-planning process.

Group interviewing

Quintessentially, the group interview is a qualitative data-gathering technique that relies on the systematic interrogation of a number of individuals simultaneously in a formal or informal setting. It has become associated with marketing research, and more recently with political inquiry, under the label of the "focus group". In group interviews, the interviewer/moderator directs the inquiry and facilitates the interaction among the respondents in a structured, semi-structured or unstructured manner, depending on the purpose of the exercise. Such interviews follow different formats – from free-form brainstorming sessions with little or no structure to the more systematic Delphi-type approach. Group interviews have some advantages over individual interviews. They are relatively inexpensive to conduct and often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative; they can be stimulating for respondents and aid recall; and the format is extremely flexible. Group interviews, however, are not without problems. The results cannot easily be generalised; the emerging group culture may interface with individual expression; the group may be dominated by one person; and "group-think" is a possible outcome. In addition, the requirements for interviewer (moderator) skills are said to be greater than those for individual interviewing because of the group dynamics that are present. It is difficult, moreover, to research sensitive issues using this technique. Nevertheless, group interviews, exercises and activities of various kinds invariably form a central part of any scenario-planning process.

Active interviewing

Pertinently, a prominent critic of public opinion polling once argued that the dynamic, communicative contingencies of the interview literally activate respondents' opinions (Pool, 1957). Every interview, it was suggested, is an interpersonal drama with a "developing plot". This metaphor conveys a far more active sense of interviewing than is conventionally conceived. It gives an image of the interview as an occasion for constructing, not merely discovering or conveying, information. As Pool (1957) wrote:

> The social milieu in which communication takes place during interviews modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying "true" opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide that baseline.

From the active interview perspective, participants are accepted as practitioners of everyday life, constantly working to discern and communicate the recognisable and orderly features of experience. Such "meaning-making" is not merely artful, and not just built from scratch on each interpretative occasion, but, as Garfinkel (1967) argues, interpretation orients to, and is conditioned by, the substantive resources and contingencies of interaction. Active interviewing, in this way, is a form of interpretative practice involving the respondent and the interviewer, as they articulate existing structures, resources, practices, attitudes and orientations, with what Garfinkel (1967) calls "practical reasoning". Thus, the active interview transforms the research process from one of opinion gathering into a productive source of knowledge. From the time a research topic is identified, to respondent selection, questioning and answering, and finally through to the interpretation of responses, interviewing itself can be seen as a concerted project for producing meaning. The interview process, together with its participants, is constantly developing (Silverman, 1997). The way in which data from active interviewing are assembled, analysed, written-up and used has been explored extensively. The overriding purpose, however, is to show how what is being said in the interviews relates to the experiences and issues being studied. And, in terms of applicability to the scenario-planning process, the active interview begins to describe an interlocutory approach of great value.

Long interviewing

Tangentially, what is known as the "long interview" has been accredited with being: "one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory" (McCracken, 1988). The theory, methodology, strategy and model of inquiry are described elsewhere (McCracken, 1988). What is essentially a highly structured and phased interview-in-depth has, however, been depicted as being a sharply focused, rapid and highly intensive interview process that seeks to diminish the indeterminacy and redundancy that attend more unstructured research processes. The long interview calls for special kinds of preparation and programming, including the use of an open-ended questionnaire, so that the investigator can maximise the value of the time spent with the

respondent. There are also a number of stages of analysis and review over a significant period of time. Such an approach was not considered suitable for scenario-based projects, where the number of different views and responses is normally more important than a penetrating analysis of individual respondents' experiences.

Creative interviewing

Interestingly, the "creative interview" is used to describe an approach that challenges the more conventional practices and procedures used in interviewing. The term was first coined by Douglas (1985) in his book *Creative Interviewing*, and derives from the tradition of oral history. However, the word "creative" refers primarily to the interviewer, not the respondent, and draws from the difficulties encountered in attempting to probe respondents' "deep experience". From practice, Douglas discovered repeatedly how shallow the standard recommendations were for conducting research interviews. Such canons of rational neutrality, espoused by the likes of Converse and Schuman (1974), failed to capture what Douglas called his respondents' "emotional well-springs", and a methodology for gaining deep disclosure was much needed. This, in essence, requires the interviewer creatively "getting to know" the real subject behind the respondent. Over time, creative interviewing has become a set of techniques for moving past mere words and sentences exchanged in an interview process. To achieve this, it is argued, the interviewer must establish a climate of mutual disclosure. The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer's willingness to share their own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings. Douglas (1985) expresses it as follows:

> Creative interviewing involves the use of many strategies and tactics of interaction, largely based on an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimise co-operative, mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding.

With regard to the individual interviews that have been conducted along the lines of "strategic conversations" in the later scenario-planning exercises forming part of this study, the theoretical foundation and practical experiences provided by those espousing the use of the creative interviews have been of great help in authenticating such an approach.

Framing and interpreting

Inevitably, there is always the question of how the framing of the interview is done, who does it, and what role the researcher plays in reporting and interpreting the findings. Many volumes have been devoted to the tasks involved. Likewise, a plethora of points and problems has been identified and analysed. It is not the purpose of this study to document or develop this debate. An awareness of some of the main issues has, however, been important in constructing and conducting an appropriate methodological approach towards the interviews and inquiries that underpin the scenario exercises undertaken. The most significant of these are:

- The validity of an essentially qualitative approach.
- The difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- The role, function and influence of the investigator as a prime instrument of the research study.
- Maintaining an appropriate balance between unobtrusive exploration and proper direction of inquiry.
- Manufacturing distance from the subject under study, while exploiting knowledge and experience of it.
- Exercising the right degree of discretion and flexibility regarding the research "agenda".
- Recognising the complex and variable relationship between the investigator and the respondent.
- Being prepared to adopt a multi-method approach, as and when required.

Apart from the above, there is, of course, the age-old dilemma of framing and interpreting real-life events in two-dimensional space.

Interviewing as a negotiated accomplishment

Illuminatingly, from a review of the literature, it is clear that the point has been reached where the interview can be seen as a negotiated text. Ethnographers, whose preserve it has largely been, have realised for quite some time that researchers are not invisible, neutral entities, but rather part of the interactions they seek to study. Interviewers are increasingly seen as active participants in interactions with respondents, and interviews themselves deemed to be negotiated accomplishments by both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place. Put another way, by eminent practitioners (Fontana and Frey, 2000):

> We are beginning to realise that we cannot lift the results of interviews out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim them as objective data with no strings attached.

Manifestly, certain types of interviewing are better suited to particular kinds of situations. The important thing is that researchers are aware of the implications, pitfalls and problems of the different interview techniques they choose. Pitting one type of interview against another is futile, and redolent of the paradigmatic "quantitative versus qualitative" hostility of past research generations. Indeed, a growing number of researchers are using multi-method approaches – "triangulation", as it has become known – so as to achieve broader and often better results.

The strategic conversation

Turning to the research in hand, as the scenario studies progressed, so the value of selected "in-depth" interviews was recognised as a critical component of the process, and

consequently more thought was given to the choice, nature, framework and protocol for such interactions. A *post hoc* study of the literature on interviewing, and the gaining of a greater understanding of current thinking and practice in qualitative research techniques, revealed that co-incidentally, and reassuringly, the set of studies described in this work had moved in the same way as interviewing methods over the years, and an approach embracing the qualities and characteristics of "creative interviewing" leading to interviewing as a negotiated accomplishment, had evolved. From a relatively structured and somewhat stylised format, the mode of interview had moved quite quickly through more conventional semi-structured and unstructured procedures to a stage where a more "active" and "creative" role was played by the interviewer, and what has been dubbed "the strategic conversation" emerged.

The term "strategic conversation" has been borrowed from van der Heijden (1996), with whom the author was fortunate enough to exchange views, and from whom derive insight, during the project. He, however, uses it in a much broader sense to define the continuing process of dialectic that takes place within an organisation as part of a scenario-planning exercise – and beyond – to form a shared mental model of the organisation, its goals, and the way in which it sets out to achieve them. Here, the author has employed the term to describe the special form of dialogue that has been developed at interviews in some of the studies undertaken. As the operationalisation of one or two of the continuing studies occurs, or as new studies are made and implemented, so it is hoped to move more towards the definition and usage that van der Heijden (1996) espouses.

Purpose

There are many, interrelated, reasons for conducting strategic conversations as part of a scenario exercise, which can most usefully be summarised as follows:

- Establishing the goals and objectives of the agency concerned.
- Comprehending the mental models of the decision makers.
- Bringing to the surface trend-breaking developments in the business/organisational/community environment.
- Correcting institutional myopia.
- Recognising fresh external signals of prospective change.
- Eliciting strategic insights and intuitions.
- Discovering the concerns of "key players" about the future.
- Identifying burning questions of the moment.
- Confirming issues and trends.
- Assisting in understanding predictability, impact and uncertainty.
- Starting to form a strategic vision.
- Helping to construct a set of scenario logics.
- Capturing a range of perspectives.
- Tackling and reducing complexity.
- Determining competitive advantage and distinct competencies.
- Committing decision makers to the scenario-planning process.
- Diagnosing difficult decisions or awkward people that might hamper the process and deffusing them.
- Setting the strategic agenda.

The underlying purpose, perhaps, is that conversation leads to action. This is shown diagrammatically in Exhibit 1.

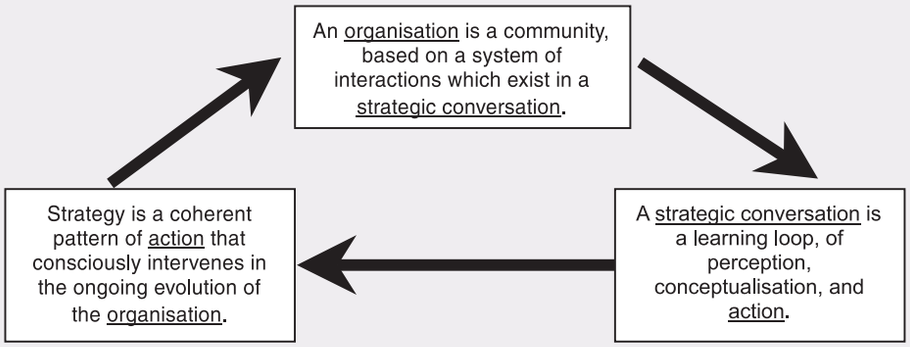
Whereas van der Heijden (1996) sees scenario planning as a natural tool for use in strategic conversation, the author is currently at the stage of using strategic conversation as a basic technique in scenario planning. The next step will be to complete the loop and employ the scenarios developed as the framework and reference points within which the continuing strategic conversations take place during policy implementation. Indeed, this is starting to happen in several study areas (e.g. Studies 3, 4 and 9).

Process and participants

There is really no set process for the conducting of strategic conversations nor rules regarding participants. Each project will largely determine its own programme of events and participants according to the nature, timescale and resources of the exercise. Nevertheless, a few general comments can be made in the light of the experience gained from the studies described earlier:

- It is important to hold several strategic conversations at the outset of the scenario-planning process. These should help establish the "scenario agenda" and, more particularly, assist in posing the "strategic question". The selection of interviewees is, of course, material. The client would normally be one; an eminent expert in the general field of inquiry another; and an experienced journalist specialising in the subject a third. These might each be re-interviewed with benefit at a later stage.
- The total number of interviews or conversations might vary from a few to 50 or more. It is generally found, however, that between 12 to 20 normally suffices for most scenario exercises, unless there are special "organisational" or "political" reasons for including a broader constituency or involving particular people. It is important, however, to review the interview process after a significant number of conversations have been held to identify what missing dimensions, perspectives or policy areas have been ignored or excluded. In Study 5 on global real estate futures, for example, a couple of major property occupiers were added, and in Study 9, Dublin city foresight, community groups and political parties were found to be missing from the first trawl of conversations.
- The nature of the strategic conversation naturally changes as the number of interviews concluded grows

Exhibit 1 — The art of strategic conversation



Source: van der Heijden (1996)

and the scenario-planning process proceeds. Once the key decision areas or critical factors are identified, there is an understandable tendency to probe more assiduously into the consequences or uncertainties of particular issues or courses of action. Equally, as the interviewer becomes more steeped in the intelligence of the study, so the questioning can become more searching and productive. In any event, the conversational process is bound to develop and accumulate.

- As intimated earlier, there are people "not to miss" in selecting the interviewees, either by way of their influence or because of the information or insights they can provide. The pursuit of these people is crucial to the success of the exercise. It is also extremely fruitful to hold at least one or two strategic conversations with "remarkable people", who might not be central to the study itself but have the capacity to think creatively and differently.
- Probably the most important distinguishing feature between the strategic conversation and other forms of in-depth interview is the character and role of the interviewer. A strategic conversation, by its very nature, must be as close as possible, a dialogue between peers. There have to be mutual respect and understanding between the interviewee and the interviewer, and an ability for each to converse with equal recognition and appreciation of the other's experience and knowledge. This is not always easy to achieve. Indeed, it is relatively rare for a researcher to have the standing and proficiency in a particular field to fulfil this requirement. In these circumstances, it is often necessary to retain someone suitably qualified to act as interlocutor, and for the researcher to play the part of reporter.

Preparation

For a strategic conversation to be truly productive, preparation must be painstaking. The environmental scanning exercise will provide a context for the conversation. A "scrap-book" of relevant, up-to-date cuttings, drawn from newspapers, journals, reports and even internal communications, will give a greater insight into the precise issues at play in the process. And a full briefing by the client organisation, together with informal discussions with those most closely concerned, will point the direction and colour-in some of the background. Although the strategic conversation follows the format of an unstructured interview, and thus there are no pre-determined lists of questions, it is necessary to prepare in advance some form of framework of analytic categories, recognising that these might change as a result of the conversations held, written-up and analysed.

Procedure

While the routine will vary according to circumstance, there are a few general guidelines that should be followed by the interviewer to create a successful strategic conversation:

- The interview should open with an explanation of the purpose of the exercise, the approach being adopted and the use to which the information gathered is being put. It is important to stress the anonymous nature of the interview, and that the data and views gathered will be stored and applied by subject or issued in an unaccredited way.
- So far as is possible, the conversations are conducted in an open-ended manner, with a general, and not specific, line of questioning, designed to promote a free flow of discussion, in which the interviewee, rather than the interviewer, sets the agenda.
- The task of the interviewer is to establish him/herself as a good listener, yet, at the same time, a constructive participant in the conversation. Not always an easy balance to achieve, much will depend on the

relationship that is established between the parties, and the level of trust that is reached.

- The interviewer must see him/herself as an active instrument in the conversation, but also try to be non-directive, retain a critical awareness of their own hidden assumptions, and avoid overlong, leading or biased questions.

To trigger responses by the interviewees in the strategic conversations conducted as part of most of the studies, two distinct lines of questioning were adopted. Initially, they were employed independently but, as the approach evolved in successive exercises, so the two lines merged into a single broad path of inquiry, but one capable of being adapted into different configurations according to the way in which the situation unfolded. The two principal lines of questioning were:

(1) *The "six-sector" approach*. This followed the system employed in the environmental scanning exercise described in Chapter 5 on exploring change. In the context of the strategic conversations, once the scene had been set, and an initial rapport established, trigger questions were sequenced in terms of: "What cultural/demographic/economic/environmental/governance/technological factors would you view as being critical to the future?"

This had the advantage of being comprehensive, ordered and systematic. It was also easy to analyse and classify. The main disadvantage, however, was that it did not plumb the "emotional well-springs" of the respondent; elicit the person's real perceptions; or unlock their true strategic thinking.

(2) *The "seven-questions" approach*. This originates in the work of the Institute of the Future (Amara and Lipinski, 1983), and has successively been refined by Shell (Schwartz, 1991), van der Heijden (1996) and ICL (Ringland, 1998). In essence, it comprises a set of questions, which have been adapted by the researcher generically to read:

- If you could pose three questions to a clairvoyant who can foretell the future, what would you ask?
- In the best possible world what would you hope for?
- In the worst possible world what are your greatest fears?
- What pivotal events from the past few years provide good lessons for the future?
- What major decisions with long-term implications are faced at the moment?
- What major constraints do you experience inside/outside the organisation/system?
- If all constraints were removed, and you could direct what is done, what would you do?

(There are other variants such as "What is your best dream?", "What is your worst nightmare?" and "What keeps you up at night?".)

The questions would obviously be tailored more specifically according to time, location, agency, issue and individual concerned. The advantage of this approach, however, is that the matter of priorities, and the relative impact of issues and trends can be addressed more directly. It also calls for a more imaginative and searching set of answers. On the other hand, it does not always cover the full range of issues and uncertainties surrounding the strategic question posed. Moreover, while most interviewees found that the "lighter" approach enabled them to feel free to explore various unusual avenues of thought, some found the more "fanciful" nature of the clairvoyant questions inhibiting, and the conversation became stiff and stultified.

In the later stages of Study 5 on global real estate futures, and almost throughout Study 9, Dublin city foresight, a combined approach was employed. By this means, the advantages of both approaches were exploited, and the disadvantages minimised. Where a respondent was clearly uncomfortable with the inventiveness of clairvoyance, a switch could be made to sectoral interrogation. Equally, when the "what if?" technique led to excessive fantasising, a diversion to the sectoral method extracted more precise and realistic responses. As the strategic conversions progressed, an adroitness in moving seamlessly between the two approaches was developed, until they had effectively merged into one single approach.

One factor that requires careful consideration throughout the strategic conversations is the contribution of the interviewer. Whereas, in more conventional interview situations, the objective is to be entirely neutral, distanced and unobtrusive, this is not always possible, nor even desirable, in conducting a strategic conversation, for one cannot expect the respondent to engage in a monologue of up to two hours. The interviewer has to participate. Normally in reactive mode, seeking clarification, asking for amplification or feeding back what has just been heard. Sometimes, however, it is necessary, and profitable, to share and stimulate the discussion by way of reciprocity of views or recounting of anecdote. This has to be infrequent and very carefully judged. It is a challenge to participate in a conversation while standing back from it at the same time. As an experiment, in one study (Study 9), about eight interviews were conducted by the author, together with a research assistant to record the conversation; around a further eight were conducted by another academic colleague, senior but not perhaps seen by the respondents as of quite the same standing, again with a research assistant; and yet a further eight or so were conducted by the research assistant alone. It is very difficult to judge, and impossible to measure, but it was generally agreed by the respective interviewers that those conversations perceived

by the interviewee to be between "peers", and interspersed on occasions with an exchange of views and experiences, were more revealing and worthwhile.

One aspect of the strategic conversations conducted along the above lines is that, whilst it is not normally held to be recommended practice in scenario construction to build obviously "good" and "bad" alternative futures, in the soliciting of valuable responses during a strategic conversation the exploration of "good" and "bad" worlds tends to be a very powerful trigger to creative and productive thought. Indeed, on a number of occasions, the three questions relating to future worlds under the "seven-questions" approach" was sufficient to prompt a stream of thought from the respondent that occupied most of the time available for the interview. It has been argued elsewhere, moreover, that the good or bad scenario questions must follow the clairvoyant formula, if they are to work well (van der Heijden, 1996). Not only do these questions expose the interviewee's ideas of how things hang together in the world, but in this way value systems start to surface.

Practicalities

Mundane or not, there are certain practical points which have emerged over the course of the studies which are worthy of note:

(1) Such strategic conversations are best conducted in surroundings familiar and comfortable to the interviewee.

(2) It is almost always wise to interview "two-in-hand", with the principal interviewer supported by the assistant, not merely to take notes, but also prepared to interject a question if, for any reason, it is necessary. One interviewer is too few, and three are too many.

(3) The best way of opening a strategic conversation has been found to be a short set of questions along the lines:
- How did you arrive in your present position?
- What did you see as the initial challenge?
- Has that changed?

(4) Likewise, a suitable way of concluding:
- What might you have done differently?
- What would you wish to be remembered for?

(the epitaph questions)

(5) If possible, it is always advisable to tape the conversations. On the positive side it: allows the interviewer(s) to concentrate on questioning and listening; permits questions effectively formulated to be recorded accurately for future use; provides a reliable and unbiased record; affords direct quotes to be made; and supplies a permanent record for others to use. On the negative side, it: may adversely affect the relationship; inhibit or distract the respondent; reduce reliability on the responses; and take up considerable time and effort in transcription. In all the strategic conversations conducted as part of the studies undertaken the only refusals to be recorded were from two or three very senior public officials. If it is not possible to record the interview, good note-taking becomes critical.

(6) The time allowed for a strategic conversation is usually set at an hour. In practice, however, the majority of sessions exceeded this, with some running to two or more hours.

(7) Two shorter interviews with the same person, at different stages of the scenario process, are sometimes more productive than one extended session.

(8) It is important to stress the confidential and non-attributable nature of the interview. And, if a quote, reference or credit is desired to be used, then clearance will be sought first.

(9) Seek quality of conversations, not quantity. As previously mentioned, most scenario exercises can be performed with a maximum of 20 interviews, and some successfully completed with as few as four or five.

(10) Recognise that analysis of the conversations can be a very time-consuming process. It is usual to allow several hours to evaluate each interview.

Group exercises

Group exercises of various kinds are central to foresighting and the scenario-planning process. Indeed, the very object of the exercise is often to bring a group of concerned or involved people together to share in exploring what the future holds and how it will be shaped. As part of the studies an assortment of group activities was held with varying formats, different sizes and diverse compositions. What this section aims to achieve is to distil some of the experiences gained and lessons learned from group exercises performed at the separate stages of the scenario process. In doing so, it should be recognised that in practice a number of these stages would be taken together by the same group at a workshop event, and in a few cases the selected group tackled the entire scenario process in concert.

The strategic question

This defining initial stage is also known as "task identification", "decision focus", "the business idea" and "clarifying the decision area". In most of the studies this question, determining the purpose of the exercise, was set by the "client" and was not the subject of group debate. Nevertheless, when groups were then established to take on the sundry tasks entailed in the scenario planning it was always deemed essential to discuss the framing of the strategic question and gain general agreement to it. As most of the studies were concerned with broad issues relating to the built environment, however, the strategic questions posed were formulated in the most universal and unexceptional manner. Even in the two which related to particular organisational futures (Studies 3 and 4) the questions were posed in a panoramic, "positioning" way.

The only issue of any real debate was the time-horizon chosen for the exercise. It became clear that, where private sector participants from the business community were involved, there was always a pressure to foreshorten the timescale of the exercise. Certainly in the real estate and construction industry-related exercises there was a strong desire to limit the "future" to ten years at most. Otherwise, little dissension or difficulty was experienced.

The driving forces of change

Some period of time at almost every workshop or group exercise was devoted to surveying the driving forces of change. Even where these had been fairly well established by a previous desktop environmental scanning exercise it was considered imperative for participants to share the collective experience of identifying these forces themselves. Normally this task took little more than one to two hours, and was conducted in the form of a brainstorming session, structured by a six-sector system approach. The most obvious and understandable trait to be discerned was that where such an investigation moved into areas of potentially significant change that might have a foreseeable effect on the character or relevance of the jobs of those involved, the greater became the resistance to recognise the prospective force of such change. This exploration of the driving forces of change invariably took place in conjunction with an exercise relating to at least one other stage of the scenario-learning process, and often as a preliminary session to an event pursuing the whole process.

Issues and trends

Issues and trends usually start to emerge when the driving forces of change are being determined, and a certain difficulty is sometimes experienced in disentangling the different threads of force, issue and trend. Competent facilitation solves this. Again, basic brainstorming was commonly the way in which these issues and trends were collected – supplemented by views garnered from strategic interviews, and information gathered from environmental scanning. In most of the studies the "six-sector approach" (cultural, demographic, economic, environmental, governance, and technological) was used to collect and classify the issues and trends identified. In some studies, another similar variant was employed. At first instance, the group would normally "free-wheel" without discussion, assembling an array of items without defining, compositing or grouping. Then a debate would take place combining roughly synonymous matters, so that what might be well in excess of 200 points would be reduced to say 120. Sometimes, issues and trends would be studied at this stage with interesting connections examined and clusters of related issues grouped together to start forming a story-line for the actual scenarios. More usually, however, the issues and trends would first be evaluated for their impact and uncertainty.

In the two studies that were geared towards institutional futures and impending change (Studies 3 and 4) the popular strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) approach was adopted. These exercises lasted approximately half-a-day and provided excellent insights into the perspectives of participants at all levels of the organisation – and from outside. The technique is now fairly familiar to anyone involved in strategic planning and best described in the context of scenario planning elsewhere (van der Heijden, 1996). Suffice it to say that SWOT data can be a quick and easy way of establishing a scenario agenda. It is not an approach that lends itself, however, to broad-based studies, which are not concerned with business ideas, competitive advantage or organisational change.

Impact and uncertainty

In a majority of the studies conducted some attempt was made to classify the issues and trends identified according to their degree of uncertainty of occurrence and how direct their impact is likely to be in determining priorities. Two basic approaches were used, which ultimately have been combined into a single process. These were:

(1) *Positioning on a grid.* This is a visual method, illustrated in several of the studies, using a two-dimensional grid, as shown in Exhibit 2. The idea being to sort out the different factors (indicated above by their number), placing them on a grid where the participants think they belong. Each factor is taken in turn and its position discussed according to its perceived "higher" or "lower" uncertainty and impact. Relative positioning is more important than absolute.

(2) *Impact and uncertainty survey.* This is a questionnaire survey approach in which participants following the group exercise on identifying issues and trends were asked to assess the factors in accordance with a format illustrated in Exhibit 3.

Some teething problems were experienced in the design of the questionnaire and the terminology employed, but those were resolved by the time later studies were conducted. For the Dublin city foresight both approaches had successfully been combined, so that a group exercise and survey questionnaire were used in an integrated fashion to help form the scenario logics.

Critical factors/determinants

Where a quadrant/matrix approach was used to help distinguish and determine the alternative scenarios, then it was necessary to agree the two axes upon which this would be based. These were normally suggested by the project team of the particular scenario exercise, based upon the group's previous findings, discussed by the participants as a group, and then agreed, with or without change.

Exhibit 2 — Positioning impact and uncertainty

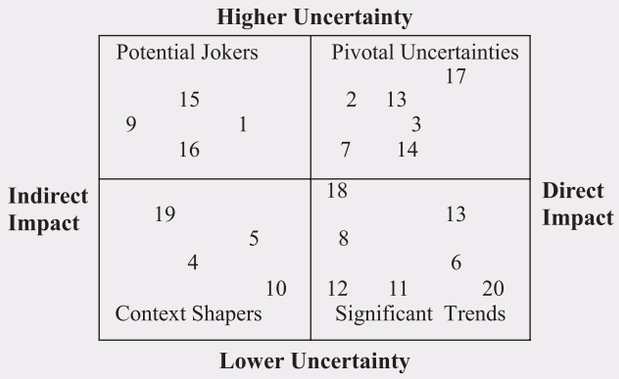


Exhibit 3 — Issues and trends: impact and uncertainty questionnaire

ISSUES AND TRENDS
IMPACT AND UNCERTAINTY

You are asked to consider and rate the following issues and trends described below as a "List of Impacts and Uncertainties" on the scale of 1 to 5 in the appropriate box. Please try to minimise the use of 3 as a level of rating.

Impact
5 = Most Important / Very High Impact
4 = Important / High Impact
3 = Modest Importance
2 = Unimportant / Low Impact

1 = Trivial

Likelihood
5 = Most certain by 2015
4 = Likely
3 = As Likely as not
2 = Unlikely
1 = Almost impossible by 2015

Please add any other issues and trends you feel relevant in the spaces provided.

Ref	Issue/Trend	Impact (1= low to 5= high)	Likelihood (1= low to 5= high)
	Cultural, Demographic, Economic, Environmental, Governance, Technological		
1			
2			
3			

Scenario logics

These are the underlying principles around which the different scenarios are structured. They focus on the pivotal uncertainties identified in earlier stages of the process, and present alternative theories of the way the world might work. The discussion that takes place around determining these logics or themes is among the most important to take place in the scenario-building exercise. It is not always the product that is crucial, but rather the process of thinking, debating and reflecting that occurs among the participants. The main

problem encountered in most of the studies is that insufficient time was available for a full consideration of these structural rationales. The earlier stages took longer than they might, due to participants' unfamiliarity with the process, and the later "sexier" stages of scenario building and policy testing loomed enticingly. Nevertheless, it was found that, without an understanding of its logics, participants – and ultimately decision makers – cannot assess properly the plausibility of a scenario.

Creating the scenarios

In only two of the studies were the full scenarios actually constructed as part of a group exercise (Studies 3 and 4). Even here, the "story-lines" were written up by a professional journalist, who had been present during group meetings and workshops concerned with the previous stages described above. In these two instances, there was an iteration between the group identifying the scenario logics of three or four different futures, the writing-up of alternative draft scenarios by the journalist, then back to the group for further discussion, amendment and refinement. This was repeated twice in both cases. Indeed, this process gave rise to considerable contention, and even, at times, conflict. In one study, in fact, it almost led to a breakdown of the process.

In many of the other exercises where original scenarios were devised it was usually done by a small project team of three or four, with one person, the researcher, taking responsibility for the final product. In several scenario exercises, where time was of the essence, and policy testing the imperative, existing scenarios prepared for previous projects were employed, sometimes with slight re-orientation.

Testing policy options

In many ways, the testing of policy options is the most important stage of all, and the one most dependent on, or directed towards, group activity. Several of the studies were exceptionally successful in exploiting the process to produce agreed and targeted strategic policy options which have since led to inceptive action (Studies 1, 2 and 3). Even where no specific actions have resulted from group interaction, the group dynamics, exchanges and consequent conclusions have lived on memorably with the members of that group, and with other participants in the exercise. One particular incident is worth recalling. In the testing of policy options at the second workshop of the global real estate futures exercise at the RICS in London, one group, comprising a leading real estate consultant, a senior executive of one of the largest insurance companies, the property director of the national telecommunications company, the head of research for a prominent commercial firm and one of the country's best-known retail consultants, arrived at an inescapable, though to them surprising, strategic policy option for the future of commercial property investment, development, management and occupancy, namely – that the property industry would have to become more involved in, and committed towards, local community affairs in locations where they own, build or occupy property for the future viability of their businesses. Not likely to be implemented by any of their organisations in the near future, but formidable food for future thought for all of them – and those around them at the time.

Identifying signposts

Probably the most difficult of all the stages in the scenario process, and one again most suited or opposite to group activity, is the recognition of certain signals, signposts or early warning triggers that herald significant change in the external environment, leading to a switch of direction from one prospective future to another. These signposts might be political, regulatory, legislative, economic or social. Their initial identification in the scenario process, and subsequent recognition from monitoring change in the external environment, enable strategic planners and decision-makers to develop contingency plans to respond to sudden change. A critical component of long-term success. It has to be recorded, though, that this stage in most of the studies was the one that deserved most, but was afforded least, time. It is intended to rectify this deficiency in the current Dublin city foresight exercise.

Other lessons learned

There are a number of very practical lessons of a general nature to be learned from the studies undertaken to date. Some of the most obvious of these can usefully be listed as follows:

- *Stay focused.* Ideally, the scenarios should be developed within the context of a focal question, and this question should remain at the forefront of all participating in the exercise.
- *Keep it simple.* Sometimes short exercises, with restricted aims, limited issues and straightforward plots are the most successful. It is rarely an exhaustive inquiry, using sophisticated research tools and creative writing skills, that is required. Comprehension, communication and application among those involved are normally much more important.
- *Keep it interactive.* Maintaining enthusiasm and commitment for the exercise among those participating is paramount. Discussing, exploring, arguing, experimenting, challenging, testing, sharing should be the characteristics of productive group activities within the scenario process.
- *Pass on ownership.* Participants should clearly derive a sense of ownership of the scenarios and the policy options that result, but so too should the decision-makers, for whom or by whom the original strategic question was posed.
- *Communicate effectively.* To help bring alive, provoke response, and make memorable the scenario exercise it

is worth considering the use of various techniques including dramatisation, role playing, creative writing and multi-media presentations.

- *Have fun.* Generally speaking, if the scenarios do not generate a sense of fun and enjoyment for those taking part, then they are probably not being conducted properly.

Conclusion

By definition, the future cannot be measured. Foresighting is largely a matter of conjecture, and at the heart of conjecture lies conversation. In the same way, institutions and organisations are essentially networks of personal interconnections, and those interconnections are themselves mainly based on conversation. In enabling complex adaptive organisations to look ahead to the future, conversation, in one form or another, becomes a key component of strategic planning. Scenario exercises, in turn, are the prime tool of strategic planning, and conversations, either by way of individual in-depth interviews or by group discourse, are fast emerging as a central feature of the scenario-planning process.

The creative way in which the strategic interview approach has evolved during the course of the studies described earlier to conceive of interviewing as a negotiated accomplishment has its critics. Such an active approach is said to invite unacceptable forms of bias – "contamination", the purists maintain, is everywhere (Silverman, 1997). This criticism only holds, however, if a particularly narrow view of interpretative practice is taken. Bias is a meaningful concept only if the subject is a performed, purely informational commodity that the interview process might somehow taint. But if interview responses are seen as products of interpretative practice, they are neither perfected nor pure. Any interview situation, no matter how formalised, relies on the interaction between participants. This is especially the case in the highly behavioural, subjective and creative environment of foresighting through scenario planning.

The unconventional nature of strategic conversations, moreover, does not mean that analysis is any less rigorous than that applied to traditional interview findings. On the contrary, the results from strategic conversations require a disciplined approach towards both process and substance. This is illustrated by the use of the "six-sector approach" towards collecting, classifying and evaluating issues and trends, and the twin approaches of quadrant/matrix positioning and questionnaire survey in assessing impact and uncertainty. Put simply, furthermore, the strategic conversations investigate the "hows" and "whys" as well as the "whats" of experience.

Reassuringly, it is worth restating that the evolution of the author's approach towards interviewing – moving from a more structured, disinterested format, to a less formal, participatory style – mirrors the development of interviewing elsewhere in the social sciences from structured questions to negotiated text. It is also a reflection on the robustness of the professional doctorate programme that it enables the researcher to become equipped in a variety of inquiry roles relevant to professional practice as well as academe.

Nevertheless, in the context of all interviewing, it is perhaps worth remembering that we are probably no different from Gertrude Stein, who, on her deathbed, asked her lifelong companion, Alice B. Toklas: "What is the answer?" And, when Alice could not bring herself to speak, Gertrude then asked: "In that case, what is the question?" ■

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